

# MARK 12

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## The Parable about the Passion

This parable, based on the fifth chapter of Isaiah, is the most allegorical of all the Synoptic parables: it very clearly means only one thing, and that thing is very easy to identify. The vineyard is Israel, the tenants are the authorities, the servants are the prophets, and Jesus is the Son.

This makes us think that, rather than being a simple parable of Jesus, it is probably one that has been heavily edited in the early Church. Jesus has not been referring to himself as “the Son” - although the demons do, and so does the Evangelist in his first verse. The statement that Jesus is the Son of God comes from no human lips until the moment of his death, when a Gentile - the Centurion - will say: *truly this was God’s son*. Calling Jesus by this title therefore belongs in the early Church, not the lifetime of Jesus. This parable has been edited. Also indicative of this is the presence of the quotation from Ps 118, a favourite text in the early Church for talking about the Church being aligned on the rejected stone. It isn’t at all relevant to the meaning of the parable, though, because the parable doesn’t talk about the Church, only about judgment on the Jews. The story is understood perfectly by those who hear it, although they do not “hear” its message in the good sense; it only results in their further advancement towards the moment of their own judgment, because it causes them to be more committed to his death. Note also that in Isaiah the vineyard itself receives judgment; here it is only the tenants that are judged.

As for the situation described, it is possible to imagine that when absentee landlords (Palestine was largely owned by them) die, the *heir* - strictly so called - might arrive to inspect and take possession; in such a case the murder might result, if unarraigned, in the tenants’ inheriting; so it is not really so far-fetched a tale as it seems. Note that the end of the parable is a warning to *all*: a faithless Gentile Church could just as easily be dispossessed as the Israel that rejected Jesus. Paul makes just this point in Rom 9 -11.

## Controversies

a. Pharisees and Herodians The first of three approaches - the first two malicious - involves the Pharisees and the Herodians, an unlikely coalition last seen in ch. 3 in the context of Sabbath observance. The point is probably that the Pharisees were deeply religious, but the Herodians deeply involved in politics. The resulting mixture is explosive; and a coalition like this will be necessary if Jesus’ death is to be accomplished. Their question is accordingly religious and dangerously political: is it *lawful* to pay the Roman poll-tax. The zealots considered it irreligious to pay the tax to foreigners, and this meant that most of the population could find a ready popular-religious reason for the general unwillingness to pay any tax which belongs to all people of any time. On the other hand, the Herodians hover at hand, ready to collect any evidence of seditious talk against the Roman tax.

Jesus’ response evokes the Creation story by asking whose *eikon* (image) is on the

denarius; it would have the image of Caesar, and the words:

TIBERIUS, CAESAR, DIVI AUGUSTI FILIUS

or, if the coin were Syrian,

TIBERIUS, CAESAR, AUGUSTUS FILIUS DEI

legends which deeply offended the Jews; but ironically no-one has to search far for the idolatrous image which they all had in their pockets. Jesus' word *eikon* reminded the listeners that each one of them was made in the *eikon* and likeness of God. Christians reading the Gospel would further recall the word used by Paul in the letter to the Colossians:

He is the *eikon* of the unseen God, and the first-born of all Creation

So they have before them the image of Caesar, and the image of the Creator. Jesus' response

Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar

- that is, the money, its idolatrous claims, and the ugly attempt upon his personal safety in their malicious questioning of him -

and give to God what belongs to God

- that is, yourselves as people created in his likeness - is a masterly resolution of the dangerous situation.

b. Sadducees The Pharisees projected a lordly authority over divine mysteries, and held long hands in expositions of what the mysteries of God were like. The Sadducees, by contrast, held a blanket scepticism about post-mortem survival, and this question is meant to ridicule Jesus' avowed faith in life after death. They are aristocratic, priestly individuals, and their restriction of scriptural authenticity to the Torah - the first five books of the Bible - renders the traditions in favour of resurrection unacceptable to them. Jesus speaks fully about life at the resurrection: he reports several common beliefs among Pharisees of the day - that the dead neither eat nor drink nor marry, that they are like the angels, and we can imagine that such a discussion as this - pre-supposing rather than attacking the resurrection - must have been familiar to pharisees rather than Sadducees (cf v 23). The second part of the answer of Jesus confronts the question about whether or not there is a resurrection. It is, says Jesus, absurd to profess that God makes a promise to an individual - and God's promises are never revoked - unless that person is to be raised to life in order to inherit the faithfulness of God. God is greater than death, and death cannot abrogate his promises. The questioners are basically in error, and they are told so at the beginning and at the end of Jesus' answer. We are being called to surrender our own limited comprehension of what God does, to make room for a fulfilment whose scale and comprehensiveness will be divine rather than human. In this way we can transcend our own imitations and be open to the redemption of God.

Notice that the resurrection is here envisaged as a prelude not to judgment, but to eternal life. These words are written for believers, who themselves await the resurrection not in trepidation, but in hope. There is nothing threatening of the Sadducees, therefore, in the response of Jesus.

c. The Scribe The third question to Jesus proceeds from an expert on the Holy Scriptures, and his reception from Jesus is quite different from the previous two. Jesus' answer to the question is of course thoroughly Jewish (the Creed is Deut 6:4-9, 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41). We should note that the radical obedience of Jesus to this kind of commandment - rigidly insisting on love that never loses sight of God, and never takes refuge in legalism - is intimately connected with the death that is now days away from him.

Uniquely in the Gospels, the scribe agrees with Jesus. It is necessary that he should do so, because his power-base is precisely the Word itself, where the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees all belong to humanly-inspired vested interests and parties. This scribe is thus already "not far from the Kingdom" which will soon be here. We can see that if Jesus had met his fellow-Jews in the pure atmosphere of the Word of God, they might have been able to receive him as does this scribe.

### **The End of the Ministry**

The incidents which now follow form the ending of Jesus' public activity, since the thirteenth chapter withdraws him among the disciples who form his intimate circle. So although there are signs that everything here belongs with the controversies we've just looked at ("teacher of the Law" connects vv 28 & 32 to vv 35 & 38; "widow" connects v 40 to v 42), yet Mark's editing makes some positive breaks, isolating these last occurrences. The phrase in v 35 "As Jesus was teaching in the Temple", for instance, tells us nothing new - he has in fact been there since 11:27. And the further mention in v 38 "As he taught them" seems to refer to yet a third occasion. The most important evidence of a break is the warning against the teachers of the Law; this very clearly signifies a definitive break between the movement of Jesus and the *leaders* of the people - though not the people themselves. "Watch out for" is a turn of phrase which does not otherwise occur in the NT.

The whole passage is at a critical moment in Jesus' life. In 11: 18 after the cleansing of the Temple, there is a hint of a death-sentence: the tension in the demand for his authority in 11:27ff has also been impressive. Now Jesus quotes from the Psalm (110) where the King is told to sit at the right hand of God. The whole thing is very complex. Firstly, David is regarded as the author of the Psalms as a whole; in this quotation "My Lord" refers to the King, who is correctly addressed with a divine title because he is "seated on the throne of God's reign over Israel" (1Chron 28:5). In the early Church the statement that the exalted one is seated at the right hand of the Father is very common. When we read the original Psalm we find the interesting statement that God bears witness to the king before creation (v3); but this is made nothing of in the NT. Instead, the verse is quoted only as a text to illuminate the victory of Jesus over his enemies' malice - that is, the Resurrection. The question Jesus puts to the crowd in this story, then, must be understood as something like: "*In what way* is the Messiah to be called the Son of David?" Primarily the Church sees all the OT hopes and promises as fulfilled

in Jesus. The Church has to work out for itself what the Davidic descent actually meant. In Romans 1:3f Paul quotes an early fragment of Creed, in which the Davidic descent comes first, but is far outshone by the divine proclamation of sonship which is bound up with Easter. So *God is for us* in eternity, and *God is with us* in history in the man Jesus. It is here that the Church breaks with the Synagogue, as Mark rightly perceives.

### **Warning against the Scribes**

It is perhaps worth noting that Mark does not achieve the same chilling effect with this warning as Luke in 18:10-14, where the Pharisee is consistent, obedient, and flawless; here the scribes are denounced as inconsistent and hypocritical, disobedient to their own teaching. We recall that Matthew 23:8-11 calls on the Church to adopt a completely revolutionary attitude to personal honours. Even religious achievements are not to be held in false esteem.

### **The Widow's Offering**

We may fairly assume that her poverty is due to the depredations of a scribe, since such has very recently been mentioned. However, the gift of her money to the Temple is not the same as a gift to a scribe, and there is no real indication here that organized religion is taking her all away from her by force. Equally, there is nothing in what Jesus says that indicates that we ought to imitate the sacrificial level of her giving. Rather, the story illustrates the fact that Jesus is able to evaluate what people give with a scale quite different from that used by the world. The fragment of money she puts in is worse than tiny. A day's wage for a labourer of the time is one denarius. The woman is said to put in two *lepta*. They amount together to the smallest Roman coin, the *quadrans* - 1/144th of a denarius. The amount is pitiful; nevertheless, there are two things to be said about the gift. The first is that it was all she had to live on (whether this was true or not doesn't matter, because the moral of the story is what counts). This means that a total giving is involved which cannot be predicated of those who give out of their surplus. Secondly, she gives the gift in *two coins*; it would therefore have been easy for her to retain one of them for herself. The gift is therefore *deliberate* in its totality.

The absence of any moral teaching - condemning the rich or praising the widow - chimes with a whole tradition of Mark. RH Gundry writes:

He upsets expectations. He pronounces in ch. 8 - 9 that the Son of Man will be killed and rise after three days: that one must lose life in order to save it: that Elijah has already come: that anyone who wants to be first must be last: that entering God's kingdom with a maimed body is better than going to hell with a whole body. In ch. 10 he upsets a norm by calling the marriage of a divorced person adultery, and will continue to act upsettingly by blessing children, by describing wealth as a disadvantage impossible for anyone except God to overcome, and by advocating a life of voluntary servitude. Even on his way to crucifixion - *especially* on his way to crucifixion - Mark's Jesus dumbfounds disciples, and silences enemies, with the explosive force of his pronouncements.